

## UNSHRINKING THE KIDS

*Children's Cinema and the Family Film*

CARY BAZALGETTE AND TERRY STAPLES

I was six when I was allowed to go with my mother to a cinema in Stockholm to see the film of *Black Beauty*. I remember one scene where a man wearing a cap comes into view from the right side of the frame climbing up a ladder and discovers that the straw on the threshing floor is burning. I was extremely excited, but I wasn't afraid because I already knew, from the book, that the horse would be saved. Even today, nearly seventy years later, I can see this scene very clearly before me.

Ingmar Bergman, 1992.<sup>1</sup>

Cinema's relatively short career as a dominant cultural form has left it with a curiously ambivalent status. It is still, if only intermittently, castigated for its alleged power to deprave and corrupt; but on the whole, public anxieties about the effects of representations of sex and violence have shifted to television and video. Cinema now has museums and libraries and university departments devoted to it; there is an imposing body of theory about the ways in which it may be analysed and interpreted; space is devoted to it in serious journals; sponsors provide large sums of money to preserve 'classic films' almost as readily as they do to support performances of opera or ballet. On the other hand, cinema is not part of the school curriculum. Cinemagoing, at least in Britain and the USA, is not seen as an essential part of a child's cultural upbringing in the same way as visits to theatres or galleries are. Should it be?

In this chapter we explore the idea of cinema for children. This term can mean simply the exhibition of films for a general audience containing some children; it can also mean the dedicated production of films for children. By 'children' we mean people under the age of about twelve. We briefly survey a range of both exhibition and production at different times and in different countries; and then focus on films from two of the countries in which the concept of specialised production for children is relatively

well-established. By analysing two films – one Danish, one Iranian – we exemplify this concept at work.

A common response to the notion of cinema for children, especially in the UK and the USA, is to doubt that it is worth bothering about, when video, computers, megadrives and soon, no doubt, other home-based screen technologies can provide a huge range of moving-image entertainment accessible to children. However, children certainly still do go to the cinema: recent surveys indicate that over 80 per cent of children in the UK under fourteen have at least some experience of it.<sup>2</sup> Making a journey specially to see a film; seeing a large, high-quality image and hearing a powerful soundtrack, perhaps on several speakers; watching in a darkened room as part of an audience, most of whom are strangers; living one continuous story for 100 minutes or more: all these are features of the cinemagoing experience that render it markedly different from watching videos or television at home.

We are not arguing in favour of the cinema experience as against domestic viewing; each has factors in its favour. But one is not a substitute for the other. Video offers the chance to view and re-view favourite or frightening episodes of a story, to buzz through the boring bits, to study effects, stunts and gags, to watch with friends and to talk and exclaim, comment and subvert, while the story goes on. Cinema is different. Among its antecedents is the magic lantern; its buildings have been called dream-houses. It is a medium whose audiences may be rapt or spellbound. Such intensity of experience is not guaranteed, but there is no doubt that cinema can be memorable in a different way from video and television.

If it is accepted that cinemagoing can be worthwhile and interesting for children, what kinds of experience should it, or might it, provide? To some the answer is self-evident: appropriate films already exist, exemplified most powerfully in the work of Disney, Spielberg and film-makers associated with them. Disney in particular would have choked with horror at the suggestion that his films were aimed at children, but the fact is that when children go to a cinema what they are most likely to see is a film from the Disberg stables. In recent years these would include not only *Hook* and *An American Tail* (directed, and produced, respectively, by Spielberg), *Beauty and the Beast* and *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* (from Disney), but also the *Home Alone* films, *The Muppet Christmas Carol* and *Free Willy*, whose production teams have links with Spielberg's Amblin Entertainment or with Disney. A glance around the audience at one of these screenings will, however, bear out the marketing assumptions made by the producers: that these films offer something for everyone.

The idea that the child audience does not need to be catered for separately has not always been predominant, even in Britain and the USA. On both sides of the Atlantic the idea of a specialised cinema for children began to take firm hold in the 1930s, after the introduction of sound. Many talking pictures were quickly seen as too verbose, which made children in the audience restless; or too adult and immoral in theme. Alarm bells began to ring. Will Hays, President of the Motion Picture Producers and

Distributors Association of America, and author of its first Production Code on screen morality, said: 'We must have towards that sacred thing, the mind of a child, toward that clean and virgin thing, that unmarked slate – we must have toward that the same responsibility, the same care about the impressions made upon it, that the best clergyman, the most inspired teacher of youth would have.'<sup>3</sup>

Thus in the United States, Britain and elsewhere the practice of separate exhibition of selected, recommended films, usually on Saturday mornings or early afternoons, began to spread. It was driven by a sense of social responsibility, abetted by financial considerations. Charging a dime a head in the US, and twopence in Britain, managers were able to get an audience into the theatre at a time when it would otherwise be idle. Another commercial factor was the calculation that these matinee screenings would reduce the number of half-price children keeping out full-price adults at evening shows.

The obvious corollary to separate exhibition was specialised production, but this had no such profit inducement and was more rarely proposed. In London in 1936, reflecting on a national conference on the 'problem' of children and cinema, an editorial in *Sight and Sound* looked forward to a situation when it would be possible 'to evolve methods which might in time lead to the provision of children's films and children's cinemas, just as there are children's books and children's libraries'.<sup>4</sup> Outside the USSR this was then a fairly lonely voice, even though tentative; but ten years later, under the sunny smile of private philanthropy, the seed flourished in Britain and was soon transplanted.<sup>5</sup> In some parts of the world it still blooms, now with state support, and is responsible for, among others, the films we go on to discuss in this chapter: *Mig og Mama Mia* and *Khaneh-je Doost Kojast?*

In the United States, however, this seed soon shrivelled: the notion of specialised production for such a small audience – at most 8 per cent of the moviegoing population, according to Hays<sup>6</sup> – was just bad business. It was presumably with relief that producers read trade reports such as this in the *Motion Picture Herald*: 'A survey of juvenile attendance conducted by a Fox West Coast Theatres division manager is being cited as evidence in support of the conclusion that it is no longer necessary to produce pictures especially for junior audiences. On the contrary, according to the executive's interpretation, children are as grown up in their film tastes as a practical majority of adult theatregoers.'<sup>7</sup>

Low-price matinee screenings of such titles as *Abraham Lincoln*, *By Rocket to the Moon* and *Zoo in Budapest*<sup>8</sup> carried on in the US for many years after that, but were to some extent subverted by the vigorous development of a new genre, the 'family film'. The industry had perceived that its best way of surviving the Depression and at the time deferring to the Hays Code was through films that would attract adults and children together, at regular prices. (Clearly, animated features are part of the 'family film' phenomenon, but in this chapter we concentrate on live-action features.)

The differences between the family film (essentially American) and what

we shall call the 'children's film' (essentially, but no longer exclusively, European) began then, and begin now, with casting. In their search for an 'all-American' boy to play the part of Tom Sawyer in the 1937 *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, producer David Selznick and director Norman Taurog were explicit about their criteria. Out of the 25,000 who were looked at, over 60 per cent were ruled out on the grounds of 'size and general appearance'. The remainder underwent closer physical inspection and were rejected if they had any of the following 'defects': misshapen teeth; a short upper lip; eyes too close together; hairline too low; poor posture; a stammer, or an accent 'not typical of American youth'; ears too large; oddly shaped nose; weak chin; swarthy skin.<sup>9</sup> This left only a few hundred in the running. In other words, only about 3 per cent of American boys looked sufficiently 'American' to play an American boy for family film purposes. The quest finally produced Tommy Kelly, a Bronx schoolboy, described by one adult critic after seeing his Tom Sawyer as 'a pretty little fellow, with curly hair, sunny eyes and a slightly petulant lower lip which is rather attractive'.<sup>10</sup> It is clear from numerous accounts of such 'searches' for new child stars (which are also of course publicity stunts) that the child actors in family films had to offer not only national and ethnic identification to the child audience but sexual appeal to the adult audience as well. This aspect of their star qualities is, unsurprisingly, rarely noted; a celebrated exception being Graham Greene's description of Shirley Temple as a 'complete totsy' whose 'dimpled depravity' and 'well-shaped and desirable little body' was clearly calculated to appeal to middle-aged men.<sup>11</sup> And although it was undoubtedly the same criteria that brought forth Macaulay Culkin, similar remarks in these abuse-conscious days would seem even more outrageous.

By contrast, the children's film movement in Europe has always held that the child protagonists in a children's film should *not* be desirable moppets. Rather, they should be 'ordinary types of children . . . not the "sweet" little girls and waif-like little boys that enthrall adult film-goers'.<sup>12</sup> This was not simply a matter of economics or even anti-Americanism. It was a positive belief that children in the audience could only properly identify with children on the screen if they were recognisably from the same world as themselves. This involves not only casting, of course, but also such areas as lighting, photography and editing; we discuss these in more detail later.

The difference in approach to casting goes beyond the selection of the child protagonists. There are also the adults to consider. In a family movie, there normally have to be well-known adult stars to help bring in the audience, from Walter Brennan's Muff Potter in *Tom Sawyer*, through Julie Andrews and Dick van Dyke in *Mary Poppins*, to Robin Williams in *Hook* and *Aladdin*. Naturally, the producer wants to get full value out of an expensive star, so the part has to be a meaty one, with commensurate production values. The focus therefore tends to be on the problems of coping with kids. Such problems, big or small, are often presented in adult terms and in ways that are inaccessible to children. This is not just a matter of script and plot content; it also involves *mise-en-scène* and editing. In

*Home Alone 2*, Kevin (Macaulay Culkin) is told by his father to fetch his tie from the bathroom. Kevin replies, in close-up, that he can't because 'Uncle Frank is taking a shower in there and he says if I walked in there and saw him naked I'd grow up never feeling like a real man' – cut to reaction shot of parental consternation – 'whatever that means.' On a broader scale, the central theme of *Hook* is the redemption of the adult Peter (Robin Williams) as a 'real father', expressed through scenes and visual metaphors that offer a great deal more to the adult males in the audience than to the children. In short, the overall viewpoint of a family film is summed up by the title *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*, whereas in a children's film it would be *Sis, Dad Shrunk Us*.

Children's films can be defined as offering mainly or entirely a child's point of view. They deal with the interests, fears, misapprehensions and concerns of children in their own terms. They foreground the problems of coping with adults, or of coping without them. In the British *Hue and Cry* (1946) there are parents and choirmasters around, but they are of no account: the only adults who matter to the boys are the crooks whom they are hotly pursuing. In the Dutch *My Father Lives in Rio* (1989), Liesje's father, in prison for smuggling, is not many miles away from her. However, Liesje believes her mother's lie that he is working in Rio and secretly plans to fly out to see him. In the Germany-Turkmenistan co-production *Karakum* (1994), winner at the 1994 Berlin Kinderfilmfestival, two boys from different cultures are stranded together in the Karakum desert: they have to learn how to communicate with each other as well as construct a sand-yacht together.

The consequence of these differences is that whereas the family film can be packaged as a commercial proposition because of the size and wealth of the intended audience, not only in the country of origin but also abroad, the children's film almost invariably looks on paper like a complete non-starter, confined within its national boundaries. On occasion, when it can be chopped up into instalments or recast as a series, a children's department within a television company might put up some money. But if it aims at cinema exhibition, the only way a children's film can be made is through public subsidy. Even with such a subsidy, a children's film is always low-budget compared to a family film, and this has become part of its aesthetic.

Arguments in favour of family films have always stressed their 'universality' of appeal, although from a mixture of motives. Ideologies of 'childhood' stress that children are all the same, and are all the same the world over. There are certain themes and character types that are, it is assumed, 'guaranteed' to appeal to children. This idea is not exclusive to right-wing or romantic notions about the purity and innocence of childhood; the idea that children can transcend or ignore national, ethnic and religious boundaries has an obvious appeal to anyone wanting to prove that such boundaries are unnatural constructs. But whatever its ideological bent, the 'universal appeal' theme coincides happily with the needs of the American distributor seeking wider markets.

That children's cinema – and cinema generally – should be so thoroughly

dominated by American companies seems perfectly natural in the United States, as one would expect. That it also seems perfectly natural in many other countries is the outcome of a cinematic cultural imperialism that has been energetically promoted throughout the twentieth century. This hegemony is found in its most comfortable form in Britain, where it hardly ever occurs to anyone to remark that almost all the films we see are foreign. Most of us in the UK just 'know' that most films are American and we have learned to ignore or assimilate their linguistic and cultural differences. Of course, there are specific reasons that have accentuated this situation; particularly the fact that, after the advent of sound, American cinema appeared less class-bound to British audiences than the drawing-room sets and cut-glass accents of much indigenous product.

In many other countries, resistance to the hegemonic threat of American cinema is expressed through state subsidy for indigenous production. Where this is established, films for children are often seen as an essential element of such production. It is assumed that national film industries must catch their audience young.

Subsidy, whether in the form of direct grants or fiscal inducements, is now frequently cited as the way in which indigenous cultural forms may survive the kind of imperialism exercised by the USA. For child audiences, it may be the only way. Within Europe, national cultures are not the only beneficiaries here; subsidised cross-border distribution may serve to offer children a wider range of cinema experiences by providing films from other cultures. Of course subsidy cannot by itself guarantee high quality, any more than the market can; it is just as subject to notions of 'worthiness', 'suitability' and ideological correctness. But the argument we are making is that children's films nevertheless do constitute a valid, distinctive, sometimes innovative and challenging form of cinema, which is just as much worth fostering as any other.

Two countries, among many, that believe it is important to make children's films are Denmark and Iran. Because there is such a small home market, Danish films cannot hope for a massive return, so virtually all of them are subsidised. Of the public money budgeted for this purpose, 25 per cent is reserved exclusively each year for the development and production of children's films. It means that in Denmark there are about three new feature films for children made every year, based on scripts approved by the state-funded Danish Film Institute.

In Iran there is no equivalent percentage obligation, but films for children are regularly made by the Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults, a body funded by the Ministry of Education. The Institute was originally set up in 1965 to develop specialist book libraries for children. Later, it began to create children's painting workshops and theatre schools in different parts of the country, and to produce short films for children. Before the revolution, there were six or seven filmmakers working at the Institute; most of these have now left to work in Western Europe or the USA, but Abbas Kiarostami, whose work is now quite well-known in some countries outside Iran, particularly France, has

remained and has been joined by others. They now make features as well as shorts.

In the late 1980s, these systems of support produced, among other films, Kiarostami's 1988 feature *Khaneh-je Doost Kojast?* / *Where is My Friend's House?* in Iran, and Erik Clausen's 1989 *Mig og Mama Mia* / *Me and Mama Mia* in Denmark. *Where is My Friend's House?* received adult critical acclaim and prizes not only in Iran but around the world; it also had a reasonable, limited run in Teheran and major cities. In Paris it played for four months during 1991 and 1992; it also had a provincial run in France and was made available for schools screenings. The Institute expected it not to reach the widest domestic audience until its television screening. *Me and Mama Mia*, on the other hand, performed very well at the domestic box office, was noticed at festivals, and soon went into dubbed distribution in five other European countries with the help of loans from the European Film Distribution Office.

It is perhaps predictable from their institutional and financial origins that these two films share a low-budget, realist aesthetic. Crowd scenes, special effects, big sets, even sweeping pans and travelling shots, are rare. The numbers of speaking parts and locations are limited. Both directors developed the child actors' performances through improvisation. They both also happen to draw upon myths within their own cultural traditions: *Me and Mama Mia* uses the myth of the flying horse Pegasus who can bring back souls from the dead, and *Where is My Friend's House?* the literary symbolism of trees and flowers. But apart from this they are markedly different.

*Me and Mama Mia* is more readily recognisable as a children's film, dealing as it does with the standard fare of an absent parent and the story of how parent and child (in this case, father and 11-year-old daughter) come to terms with the mother's death. Were it not for the language difference one can almost imagine it being shown by the BBC. But not quite. The film's most startling difference from British and American product is contained in its frankness about sex. The child Rikke overhears a drunken neighbour telling her father Poul that 'a man like you needs a woman next to him in bed - nothing can beat that.' Rikke - and the audience - finds out that Rikke's father Poul is more than just good friends with Rikke's nice teacher Charlotte when Rikke goes into the living room late at night and discovers Poul and Charlotte naked together on the sofa. 'Was that a private PTA meeting?' she angrily asks her father later. 'It won't get me better grades, you know.' 'It's been a long time,' her father tells her. 'I have a life too.'

*Me and Mama Mia* is not, however, just another Scandinavian let's-be-frank-with-the-kids piece of improving drama. Rikke's own way of finding solace after her mother's death is to fall in love with a horse. Again, we may think we are on familiar territory, typical of children's fiction, especially fiction for girls, but this is no rural idyll. The horse is won from a cereal packet competition, and Rikke lives with her father in an upstairs flat in a poor and run-down area of Copenhagen. The film's preoccupation

is not with galloping across fields, but with what happens when you bring a horse into the living room; the boredom of seeing to the straw, feed and water every day; and whether you can keep a horsebox secure on a vacant lot in the middle of the city. The film is not unlike an Ealing comedy in its respect for the poignancy, as well as the comic potential, of ordinary folk's aspirations and fantasies.

It opens with a fantasy scene: a horse and a child in sunlit fields in slow motion; a smiling couple waving. But a freeze-frame on the horse cropping the grass reveals it as simply the photo on the cereal packet at which Rikke gazes while she eats her breakfast in the dim, cluttered urban kitchen, absent-mindedly acknowledging her father's instructions to wash the dishes and get the shopping on the way home. Rikke is blonde and slim, but there her likeness to the family film heroine ends: she wears glasses, not as a cosmetic gesture to 'ordinariness' but because the actor Christina Haagenzen's visual impairment is immediately evident in her distinctive squint. Haagenzen's performance is central to the film and one of its chief pleasures. She is by turns gormless, hot-tempered, sniggering, tearful, and has a fine line in 'fed-up' expressions. But in this film her performance is not used to build her as a star or to hammer home dramatic points.

In fact there are few heavily meaningful moments in *Me and Mama Mia*: there is no major dramatic conflict or portentous distinction between good and bad. In this the film again presents a contrast with most Anglo-American product 'for children'. The assumed audience is clearly not built on a deficit model of childhood where 'getting the point' and 'following the story' are supposed to be difficult and therefore everything must be spelt out at length and several times.

The first Rikke hears about having won the pony is when the cereal company has it delivered to her street in a horsebox; it so happens that the neighbourhood tramp, Ludwig, is around at the time and it is he who takes charge of the situation and leads the pony into the courtyard of the flats - 'I grew up with horses,' he says. Because Poul, while watching football on TV, had impatiently fobbed off Rikke's nagging about having a horse with ironic asides about keeping it in the kitchen and letting it sit on the sofa, Rikke commands Ludwig to lead the pony upstairs and install it in the living room. Poul is completely unaware that there was a real possibility of acquiring a horse, which allows for a fine comic scene when he arrives home to find it scrunching apples from the sofa and nuzzling into the fridge, while Ludwig contentedly butters the loaf for a quick snack and wipes his fingers in his hair. An angry scene in the courtyard follows: 'I know, "you must ask daddy first"', screams Rikke. 'All the other kids ask their mum, but I haven't got one!' The neighbours listen with interest and the factory-owner next door offers an upstairs storeroom, hay and access by the freight elevator. Poul is defeated.

Nothing that follows is particularly unexpected. The pony is named 'Tarzan'; Ludwig helps Rikke and her friend Bettina build a paddock in a vacant lot behind the flats and finds an old horsebox for Tarzan to live in; they and their friends learn to ride and the pony becomes a feature of the

neighbourhood. Other characters are drawn in: Helmuth, the disabled but randy old watchmaker who lives downstairs; the nice teacher Charlotte who's concerned about Rikke's 'lies' – 'Sorry I'm late but I had to feed my pony' – until she finds out from Poul that they have become truth. It is she who suggests a visit to a suburban riding school, where posh kids in breeches and riding helmets ride big horses over jumps. Rikke has a go, wearing the watchmaker's crash helmet, and does well until she falls off at the double jump. Bruised and disconsolate, she's talking to Tarzan by herself when she notices another girl watching her. 'Go and stare somewhere else,' Rikke snaps, and mounts Tarzan for another ride. But Tarzan bolts: the other girl punches one of the posh kids into a ditch, snatches her pony and gallops off to rescue Rikke. It turns out that she is Tarzan's previous owner: when her father lost his job they sold the pony, then called 'Mama Mia', to the cereal company. That night, two roaming drunks open the horsebox and let Tarzan/Mama Mia out. Ludwig and Helmuth set off in pursuit on Helmuth's invalid tricycle, and it is in the course of this emergency that Rikke finds Charlotte and Poul on the sofa. The pony is tracked down, but Rikke is having to confront the fact that the desires of others can conflict with her own: from Charlotte taking the place of her mother to her friends' preference for football and skating rather than mucking out the stable. And when the girl from the riding school appears on her bike, it is clear that the pony prefers to be with her. The narrative resolution is swift and without dialogue. We see Rikke and her new friend taking turns to ride the pony in a country field; then suddenly in long shot Helmuth and Ludwig are setting off home together on the tricycle and we see Poul, and Rikke and Charlotte with their arms around each other, walking away over the horizon.

This narrative structure contains many of the same elements as an American-style family film. The pony is the catalyst that enables Rikke to come to terms with her mother's death, and to understand more about human relationships, about responsibility and the nature of ownership; above all, it brings about the reconstitution of the conventional nuclear family, the lack of which is stressed throughout. There are other similarities. Erik Clausen, the film's writer and director, plays Helmuth: he and Leif Sylvester Petersen, who plays Ludwig, are well known in Denmark as a comic double-act. Poul and Charlotte are also played by well-known actors, Michael Falch and Tammi Øst, and the film has a theme song by a popular Danish group. The opportunities are thus there for serving adult pleasures and offering an adult point of view, but they are largely refused; the adult roles, despite being important to the plot, are played down.

This is achieved through the film's photographic, editorial and performance styles, which are markedly different from those of the family film. Rikke and the other children are consistently shot from low-angle camera positions, often lower than their own head height. This is maintained even in dialogue scenes where alternating point-of-view shots would be expected in classical continuity editing. For example, in the angry courtyard exchange, we see Poul from Rikke's point of view, but we see Rikke



Not a 'sweet little girl': Christina Haagenen in *Me and Mama Mia*. Photo courtesy of Danish Film Institute.

from a point to the side of Poul and at about the height of his elbow. This contrasts sharply with, say, *Home Alone 2* where exchanges between Macaulay Culkin and adults alternate between the child's and the adult's point of view in dialogue scenes to emphasise Culkin's diminutive size and consequently his precocious pertness.

Reaction shots too are handled differently in *Me and Mama Mia*. The commonest use of a reaction shot in American cinema is to show a facial expression changing, and thus to emphasise a narrative point. Such shots are frequently edited to a slow beat, particularly in the family film, encouraging the audience to savour the performance and perhaps to laugh. The more dramatically significant the moment, the more reaction shots will be used, allowing time for all the implications to sink in (both to the characters and the audience). Clausen's cutting style in *Me and Mama Mia* is far more elliptical. Take, for example, the key moment when Rikke discovers that she has won the pony: this is achieved in just eight brief mid- and close-shots as she sees the horsebox and walks towards the pony with an almost disbelieving smile. Rikke's change of expression is not emphasised; in fact at one point she turns her head to smile away from the camera; and there are no cutaways to bystanders or the friends with whom Rikke has been playing a moment before. The emotional charge of the sequence is heightened only by brilliant lighting behind the pony's head, which both outlines its mane and floods into Rikke's face, and by a few bars of the theme tune which stop abruptly as soon as she comes face to face with the pony.



The growth of the relationship between Poul and Charlotte is sketched in with similar economy. In their first conversation, when Charlotte calls at the flat (one of the very few scenes not shown from Rikke's point of view), her acceptance of a beer instead of a second coffee is significant in narrative terms but is shown in the same kind of mid-shot as the rest of the sequence. In a later scene, when Charlotte walks towards the group of neighbours gathered at the pony's paddock, there are three reverse-angle mid-shots in which Poul can be seen gazing awkwardly towards her. Then at the riding school we surmise that Rikke is aware of something going on by seeing a very brief glimpse, in a crowded long shot, of Poul's hand on Charlotte's shoulder, followed by a reverse shot in which Rikke says to Bettina, 'Look, there's dad drinking beer again', implying that he's more interested in his own, adult pursuits than in her. In other words the audience is assumed to be able to glimpse these things as they happen and to make the necessary connections.

Music is also used sparingly, and for emotion rather than drama: key sequences, such as the search for the pony over the rail tracks at night, use only natural sound. The main 'non-diegetic' use of music is the theme song itself which accompanies Rikke's first gallop with the pony down a city avenue, and is repeated in just a few other similarly exhilarating scenes. Thus, although *Me and Mama Mia* is not action-packed, the story moves along at a cracking pace and the film is only eighty-five minutes long.

*Where is My Friend's House?* is very different, and as a proposition for exhibition to child audiences, problematic. This is not because it is 'disturbing' in content but because its style is so radically different, not only from the established forms of the family film, but also from the variations offered in *Me and Mama Mia*. And if that film's plot is simple, the Iranian film's is austere and prosaic. One day 8-year-old Ahmad takes home his friend's school exercise book, as well as his own, by mistake. He knows that his friend, Mohammad Reza, won't be able to do his homework acceptably without it and will therefore be expelled; the problem is that he doesn't know where Mohammad Reza lives. The major part of the film is taken up with Ahmad's search for his friend's house. He doesn't find it. The resolution of the problem takes up a mere ten minutes at the end of the film.

The reason this little tale lasts eighty-three minutes on the screen is that a great deal of it is told in real time. For example, we don't just see Ahmad leave his own house and then arrive somewhere else in the next shot, as happens in conventional continuity editing. We see him run down the street, up a path, up every zigzag of a track crossing a bare hillside, along a ridge, through a wood, and up the hill to the next village, Poshteh. When he has to return to his own village, Koker, we see the same sequence in reverse. And yet again, when he makes a second attempt to search Poshteh, we see the same journey for a third time. The realist conventions of time and space that we have learned are bent, if not broken. For an audience prepared to accept this entirely different time-scale, it becomes possible

also to accept the intensity and suspense of the narrative on its own terms. We – not only the foreign audience but also the predominantly city-bred middle-class Iranian audience – are presented with a different world here. This is a tough rural society in which children are burdened with responsibilities and no excuses are accepted. Eight-year-old Ahmad has to mind the baby, fetch and carry for his mother, get his homework done, go out to buy bread, listen respectfully to boring old men. At the same time he bears the moral responsibility of knowing that Mohammad Reza's life will be ruined if he doesn't get the book back to him. The film's central theme is the harshness of adult-child relationships, in which the brutal imposition of endless obligations is redeemed only by children's mutual support and comradeship.

It may seem odd, in relation to our earlier comments about the family film, that Kiarostami does not see this as a film specifically for children. 'We try to make films *about* children rather than *for* children, which seems to me more serious, more interesting and more important. It allows more understanding to develop between adults – particularly parents – and children.' He cites an occasion when a 50-year-old intellectual stormed out of a screening of *Where is My Friend's House?*, protesting at its inappropriateness for a child audience, while a 4-year-old girl at the same screening had already seen it three times and 'understood it very well'.<sup>13</sup> This proves, he says, that classification of films by age group never takes account of individual interpretation. He admits that audiences consisting entirely of children get impatient with the film, wanting more action and excitement, but asserts that the same children, watching with their own families, perhaps on television, like it very much: the film becomes a catalyst for communication within the family.

Kiarostami's predominant concern through his twenty-year career as a film-maker has been with the nature of Iranian society and problems within it. In a 1992 interview he implies that his interests pose problems for his choice of subject-matter: 'With the tacit agreement of the censors, there is now a sort of self-censorship among film-makers.'<sup>14</sup> But by addressing the world of childhood he is able to explore problems which are nevertheless, in his view, fundamental within Iran. Homework is a recurrent theme in his films, a preoccupation which may seem bizarre to Western audiences, but he argues that 'as in all countries of the world, we stop children from playing and make them do this work in an obsessive manner. In the Third World, the problem is more serious than in the West. Parents and teachers pass their frustrations on to these poor children.'<sup>15</sup> In *Where is My Friend's House?*, homework and other adult-imposed tasks are the pivot upon which turn misunderstandings and antagonism between adults and children.

In a remarkable extended scene early on, the film's themes are unsparingly laid out. It takes place in the courtyard of Ahmad's family house. A formally composed long shot and leisurely pans establish the physical set-up: Ahmad and his parents and baby brother live downstairs; upstairs 'Granny' and 'Ali' (we're not told the exact relationship) are in rooms that give on to a wooden balcony running the length of the house.

Ahmad's mother is washing clothes at the pump in the courtyard and hanging them on lines stretched across the yard; his baby brother lies in a hammock stretched between the posts that support the balcony. Coming home from school, Ahmad sets out his homework books on a low rug-covered platform under the balcony, but he is instantly subjected to a barrage of demands from his mother: 'Get a nappy – no, a dry one, hang up the wet one again; get boiled water from Granny; put two lumps of sugar in it; do your homework; give him the bottle; rock him a little; do your homework, then play; rock the baby; do your work; quick, get me the washbasin.' Granny's contribution to these instructions consists of what one suspects to be a well-worn theme (ignored by Ahmad) about why he doesn't take his shoes off to go upstairs; she does, so why can't he?

It is while attempting to combine these duties with tackling his homework that Ahmad discovers that he has got Mohammad Reza's exercise book as well as his own. Since the opening scene of the film has shown the teacher reducing Mohammad Reza to tears because he keeps on losing his book and doing his homework on loose paper, we are prepared for the moment when, in silent long shot, we see Ahmad shuffling the two books to and fro, studying their covers and suddenly sitting up aghast: we are left to guess what has happened. In fact, Kiarostami has revealed in an interview that the actor, Babak Ahmadpoor – chosen for the part from the children of the village where the film was shot – had simply been asked to solve some mental arithmetic problems while this scene was being shot; the preferred reading is created entirely from the context.<sup>16</sup> The next part of the scene, however, which is performed through dialogue, directly conveys the failure of communication between adult and child. Since the mother is washing clothes, she is squatting by the washbowl and Ahmad speaks to her from a standing position; the subsequent shot/reverse shot sequence from their two points of view thus reverses the usual disposition of speakers in an adult-child dialogue. The cross-purposes of the dialogue are banal but relentless:

AHMAD: Look, I took his notebook by mistake, they're both alike.

MOTHER: So what?

AHMAD: I must give it back.

MOTHER: You'll give it tomorrow.

AHMAD: Tomorrow the teacher will throw him out of school.

MOTHER: Serve him right, he has to be expelled.

AHMAD: I took it by mistake.

MOTHER: Why didn't you pay attention?

Nothing in the performances, *mise-en-scène* or editing encourages the audience to take sides in this dialogue: Ahmad is anxious and baffled, but the mother looks up at him equally baffled, and preoccupied with other problems. All the film's dialogue is shot in this low-key way. In a later scene, when Ahmad returns from his first trip to Poshteh, he runs into his grandfather who's smoking with cronies outside a village house. Showing

off to his friends, the grandfather insists that Ahmad must stop whatever he is doing and fetch his cigarettes from the house. This is one of two points when Ahmad actually quits a scene. The camera stays with the old man as he reveals that he has the cigarettes after all; he was ordering Ahmad about just to show that he could, and for the child's moral good. There follows a long disquisition on the value of his own father's habit of giving him a penny once a week and beating him once a fortnight: 'He sometimes forgot the penny, but he never forgot the beating.' No one judges this outrageous attitude and no retribution is visited upon the tedious old tyrant; in fact we never see him again.

Much of the film is thus in an apparently documentary style, appearing to eavesdrop on inconsequential conversations and observe people going about their daily work; and most of the praise heaped upon it has commented on its naturalism. But this quality is contained within a rigorously structured framework. Kiarostami's choices of locations and sounds consistently stress Ahmad's bewildered isolation. Poshteh seems like a ghost village as Ahmad runs up and down its deserted alleys and staircases beset by noises: dogs bark, cats mew, voices chatter in the distance but hardly a soul is to be seen. Each encounter – an old man bent double under a huge load of brushwood, a sick old woman with a cloth across her mouth, an old man inexplicably chucking rocks out of a doorway – introduces complications rather than solutions. Which Nematzadeh family does Mohammad Reza belong to? Does he live in Mazevar, Khanevar, Kashegar or Assemar? By the blacksmith's or over the sheep-pen? Maybe the Nematzadeh family know the Hemmati family who live up some stairs behind a blue door. And so it goes on.

Not a 'waif-like little boy': Babak Ahmadpoor as Ahmad in *Where is My Friend's House?* Photo courtesy of Farabi Cinema Foundation.



There is also a careful use of symbols. In Persian poetry trees symbolise friendship: a lone tree stands at the summit of the hill Ahmad has to climb each time he leaves Koker, and a dead tree casts a sinister shadow over him towards the end of his hopeless search of Poshteh. Doors, shutting people off from one another, are another recurrent theme: the film's opening shot is a big close-up of the battered, blue-painted classroom door with its rusty handle, banging uselessly in the wind; there are constant references to the propensity of doors to get old and battered and let in the wind and the cold; the last shot of Ahmad at home shows him in long shot, crouched over his homework on the living room rug, staring raptly out into the darkness when the courtyard door has suddenly flown open in the wind, and his mother can be seen struggling with the billowing sheets she had hung up earlier.

Doors are a generational symbol as well: a pushy tradesman visiting Koker tries to persuade an old man to buy new iron doors for his house, which will outlive him and perhaps, he flatteringly claims, even go to a museum after his death. Later, Ahmad finds an old man who promises to lead him to Mohammad Reza's house; on the way, the old man rambles on about his own craft of wooden door-making, now falling into desuetude as the people buy nasty new iron doors. The two creep slowly through the darkened lanes of Poshteh past windows and doors whose light shines through exquisite carved screens, but Ahmad finds his own problems more pressing than the question of dying rural crafts. Like all the other adults, the old man is indifferent to the urgency of Ahmad's dilemma, and he fails to lead Ahmad to the right house. Ahmad is left with no option but to solve his problem without adult help. He stays up late and does the homework not only in his own book but also in Mohammad Reza's. The old man has made one gesture of understanding, however, when he picked a flower from beside a well and gave it to Ahmad, saying 'Put this in your friend's book.' This flower, flattened and dried but still bright yellow, 'symbol of innocence and forgiveness, and the Persian poetic icon par excellence',<sup>17</sup> is revealed in the middle of Mohammed Reza's open exercise book in the final close-up.

These two films are examples, chosen from a mass of possibilities, of subsidised production at work. They represent two ends of a continuum of relative risk. *Me and Mama Mia* is the safe end: the differences between it and other more commercial production for children, particularly in British television, are relatively minor. It is fairly similar in style and production values to *The End of the World Man* (directed by Bill Miskelly, Ireland 1986): conceived as a feature, but also capable of being cut into three weekly parts, as it was when shown by BBC children's television. The issues raised here are ones that need to be addressed in the fields of exhibition and distribution, and indeed in television markets.

*Me and Mama Mia* is a well-made, entertaining film with a strong message, which has already been enjoyed by many children. It has been acquired for cinema exhibition in at least five European countries; why

shouldn't it be seen by British and American children? The answer is, because it is in Danish. Distributors in Britain judge, in most cases without having seen it, that even with an EFDO loan paying 50 per cent of the cost of publicity and revoicing, there would not be a theatrical market big enough to make it worth bothering with. A factor in this decision, along with the film's lack of profile, is the belief that UK and US audiences (not just children), unlike the rest of the world, will no longer accept dubbed dialogue. The world television rights to various Danish children's films have been acquired by a UK company, and dubbed versions have been made (it is significantly cheaper to do this on video than on film). Many countries have bought them for television transmission – but not the UK or the US.

If dubbing is a no-go area, subtitles are even more untouchable. Watching subtitled films is simply not part of Anglo-American culture except among adult minority audiences. This has nothing to do with children's capacity to cope with subtitles: subtitled films are shown in children's festivals in London, Edinburgh and Belfast. More importantly, children in the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxemburg watch subtitled films in the cinema and on television without giving it a second thought. It is simply a question of what audiences are used to. *Me and Mama Mia* is only one of dozens of foreign-language films that are perfectly eligible for exhibition to child audiences but are excluded from US/UK markets because of resistance to dubbing and subtitling. Such films come up against the complex of prejudice and assumption that guarantees the status quo: children's culture is only of interest in so far as it does, or does not, offend against a very narrow range of strictures on sex and violence; children's likes and dislikes are assumed to be well known, uniform and unchanging. On top of this there is in Britain the curious perception that American culture is somehow not really foreign, but European culture is; that American culture is 'popular' but European culture is 'art'.

*Where is My Friend's House?* is clearly even riskier. As well as its language and cultural background, it has the added disadvantage that it could not be chopped up into instalments for television transmission. Such segmentation would kill it. It is either a continuous, intensive experience or it is nothing. Whether it is exportable in any shape as a children's film is questionable, but it raises issues and points to possibilities in the field of production. Through subsidy, Kiarostami has achieved the right to experiment with ways of exploring and representing national culture, and to address questions about generational conflict that clearly matter to children. This has involved taking risks, as creative film-makers must.

In the US and the UK, the right of film-makers to take risks is accepted in the adult world of art cinema. It would appear that different rules apply in the case of production – and indeed distribution and exhibition – for children. This area of cinema is one where, unfortunately, original and challenging work is least likely to be found. Commercial risk is the apparent justification, but the fact that work for children is of low professional status in the film industry cannot be ignored. It is possible that at the core of



this problem is the negative way in which 'suitability for children' is regularly defined. Thanks to the right-wing lobbies who tend to set agendas here, suitability is arrived at through the deletion of factors such as violence, sex and bad language; what is left when these are removed is supposed to be fit for children to see and hear. From this the perception has grown up that children's fare is essentially anodyne and harmless, self-evidently unfit for the expression of real creative talent. Thus the hypocrisy of our society's much-vaunted concern for children and the sanctity of childhood is exposed. If we really cared about children as much as our political rhetoric says we do, then we would be voting funds to ensure that the films children see do not all emerge from the same low-risk, high-yield philosophy.

#### NOTES

1. Ingmar Bergman, quoted in 'The First Film Scene I Remember', in *Felix* 92, European Film Academy, 1992.
2. Cinema and Video Industry Research Association table in Tina McFarling, 'Cinema 1990-91 Exhibition', in David Leafe (ed.), *Film and Television Handbook* (London: British Film Institute, 1992), p. 39.
3. Speech by Will H. Hays in 1922, quoted in Mrs Charles E. Merriam, 'Report of the Chairman of the Better Films Committee of the National Congress of Mothers and Parent-Teacher Associations', reprinted in Lamar T. Berman (ed.), *Selected Articles on Censorship of the Theater and Moving Pictures* (New York: H. W. Wilson Company, 1931), p. 205.
4. Editorial, *Sight and Sound*, vol. 5 no. 18, Summer 1936.
5. See Mary Field, *Good Company* (London: Longmans Green & Co., 1952), p. 2.
6. Will H. Hays, 'Motion Pictures and Their Censors', *Review of Reviews*, April 1927, reprinted in Berman, *Selected Articles on Censorship*, p. 84.
7. *Motion Picture Herald*, 8 February 1936, p. 41.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
9. Studio press handout for *Tom Sawyer*, 1937.
10. Review of *Tom Sawyer*, *Evening News*, 11 May 1938.
11. Graham Greene, review of *Wee Little Winkie* in *Night and Day*, 27 October 1937.
12. Field, *Good Company*, p. 87.
13. Abbas Kiarostami, interview with Michel Ciment in 'Dossier du Cinéma Iranien', *Positif*, no. 368, October 1991, p. 76 (our translation).
14. 'Entretien avec Abbas Kiarostami, l'Humaniste', *Revue du Cinéma*, no. 478, January 1992, p. 20 (our translation).
15. Abbas Kiarostami, *ibid.*
16. Abbas Kiarostami, 'Dossier du Cinéma Iranien', p. 78.
17. Farah Nayeri, 'Iranian Cinema: What Happened in Between', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 3 no. 12, December 1993, p. 27.

## ONCE UPON A TIME BEYOND DISNEY

*Contemporary Fairy-tale Films for Children*

JACK ZIPES

Without question, Walt Disney set the standards for feature-length fairy-tale films in the world of cinema. After his early beginnings during the 1920s in Kansas City, where he and Ub Iwerks made several shorts such as *Puss in Boots*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, and *The Bremen Town Musicians*, Disney moved to Hollywood and began perfecting the techniques of animation, organising his studio along the lines of efficient modern factories, and experimenting with storylines that would appeal to large audiences of all age groups and social classes. By 1934 he was finally ready to produce the film that would institutionalise the fairy-tale genre in the cinema industry in a manner that was just as revolutionary as the collecting and editing of the Brothers Grimm was for the print industry in the nineteenth century: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) was the first animated feature in history based on a fairy tale and made in colour with music. Moreover, as a mass-market commodity with the trademark 'Disney' it was created with such technological and artistic skill that the Disney Studios have been able to retain a market stranglehold on fairy-tale films up to the present. Consequently, any film-maker who has endeavoured to adapt a fairy tale for the screen, whether through animation or other means, has had to measure up to the Disney standard and try to go beyond it.

But just what is the Disney standard, or rather the Disney standardised fairy tale? Since all Disney fairy-tale films are alike, from *Snow White* of 1937 to *Aladdin* of 1992, it may be more appropriate to talk about standardisation and not about standards.

In fact, the success of the Disney fairy tale from 1937 to the present is not due to Disney's uncanny ability to retell nineteenth-century fairy tales with originality and uniqueness, but due to his intuitive genius that made use of the latest technological developments in the cinema to celebrate mechanical reproduction in animation and to glorify a particular American perspective regarding individualism and male prowess. In short, Disney 'taylorised' the extraordinary talents organised in his studios to represent